

November 2005

An Open Letter to the Education Community: End the Divide between Early Learning and Child Care

Dear Education Partners,

This letter is from the members of the First Call Early Childhood Development (ECD) Roundtable. It seeks to increase understanding and cooperation between the early childhood sector and education sector in developing an action plan on early learning and child care, including the spending plan for the federal funds under the recently-signed Federal-Provincial Agreement-in-Principle on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC).

Who is First Call?

First Call is an independent and non-partisan coalition of 70 provincial and regional organizations, local community coalitions and hundreds of individuals and community groups around the province that believe children and youth should have “first call” on public resources. More information can be found on our website at www.firstcallbc.org.

First Call’s ECD Roundtable

The First Call Early Childhood Development (ECD) Roundtable is a provincial network of representatives from a wide variety of service providers, community organizations, government agencies, research groups, and others committed to early childhood development. Roundtable participants share information, track trends in ECD supports and programs, discuss policy options and are committed to on-going action in support of ECD in BC. A list of organizations participating in the ECD Roundtable is appended for your information.

First Call has articulated a consensus to government for several years that BC is in need of a comprehensive ECD plan that encompasses a broad range of supports and services for young children and their families. Those supports and services include public health initiatives, family support programs, high quality child care services, early intervention supports and services and access strategies. We envision a highly visible, seamless, culturally sensitive, inclusive, and affordable basket of services for families accessible in neighbourhood hubs, wherever possible.

The importance and urgency of funding quality child care

The key place of child care as a cornerstone of ECD services has been acknowledged by academics, federal and provincial governments, as well as the community service providers.¹ Expanding access to quality affordable child care is certainly an urgent priority for working and studying parents.

¹ See, for example: Child and Youth Officer for British Columbia, Jane Morley (2005) Healthy Early Childhood Development in British Columbia: From Words to Actions, p. 18; OECD (2001) Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care; C. Hertzman (2004) Making Early Childhood Development a Priority, Lessons from Vancouver. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Advocates in BC and across Canada have been working to focus the attention of governments on the child care needs of families with young children for over 25 years. During that time there has been a dramatic rise in the number of mothers with young children who are in the workforce. Numerous studies have been done which document the benefits of quality child care settings for children's development, for working families, and have included evidence of the economic benefits of social investments in quality, affordable and accessible child care programs.²

Federal ECD funding agreements

With the recent signing of the Federal-Provincial Agreement-in-Principle on Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC), BC is expecting a total of \$633.3 million in federal funding over five years to support the goals of the agreement. This agreement is the fruit of those 25 years of advocacy. It represents the opportunity the community has been waiting for to begin building a comprehensive national child care system. There have been earlier agreements, starting in 2000, that have brought federal dollars into BC to enhance ECD programs and services, some of it for child care. Unfortunately, BC's spending on child care over this timeframe has actually decreased. With this new agreement explicitly to establish a national child care system, we are hopeful that this situation will be reversed.

Working together across sectors for a holistic vision of ECD

"Child care" and "early childhood development" are both currently placed within the responsibilities of the provincial Ministry of Children and Family Development. The Ministry of Education has been given a new responsibility for "early learning". The First Call Roundtable understands all three of these areas of responsibility to be integrated into a holistic view of early childhood development.

We want to alert the education community to our concerns about dividing early learning from child care. Any quality child care program, broadly defined to encompass full time and part time options, creates a developmentally appropriate learning environment for young children. Trained child care providers are also skilled in supporting parents in learning about their children's development.

As the discussion proceeds in communities and in the province about the plan for the use of the ELCC agreement dollars, we want to avoid an artificial split between child care and other early learning programming. It is our desire to enhance mutual understanding between the ECD sector and the education sector and avoid a competitive process developing between child care services and education services, or between the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry of Education.

Two consultation processes

Because of the division of responsibility for ECD between two provincial ministries in BC, there have been two consultation processes underway: one relating to the development of a BC child care plan and one relating to an expanded early learning mandate for the Ministry of Education.

² See, for example, G. Cleveland and M. Krashinsky (1998) The benefits and costs of good child care, Childcare Resource and Research Unit, Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto; L.J. Schweinhart, H.V. Barnes, & D.P. Weikart, (1993) Significant benefits: The High/Scope Perry Preschool study through age 27. Ypsilanti, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation.

One process is being organized through the Ministry of Education, the other through the Ministry of Children and Family Development, although an attempt has been made to make these a joint effort of the two ministries. Neither process directly asks the community for direction on the split in the allocation of the federal ELCC agreement dollars between early learning and child care.

Partnerships with schools

The ECD Roundtable acknowledges and welcomes the enthusiasm found within the education community for supporting early learning and improving children's school readiness through a variety of programs and services, such as preschools, parent support/drop-in centers, family literacy, Mother Goose, health screening and others. First Call's vision of a range of services that should be available to all families is fully supportive of these types of programming. We also respect the advocacy many in the education sector have pursued in support of expanding all day kindergarten opportunities.

First Call's ECD Roundtable sees schools as natural sites for neighbourhood hubs for early childhood programs and services and we appreciate the leadership many schools and districts have shown in embracing a partnership with the early childhood community to enhance the well-being of young children and families. We also understand the high expectations that have developed within the education community about the possibilities the new federal dollars present.

At their last Provincial Council meeting, the BC School Trustees Association, one of First Call's partner organizations, passed a motion urging member boards and communities to actively advocate for provincially-funded all day kindergarten for all students by participating in the provincial consultation process on an expanded mandate for school boards, and that the funding not be taken from the federal-provincial ELCC agreement. The latter part of the motion represents respect for the years of hard work of child care advocates to secure federal funding to start building a national child care system.

Child care dollars must be spent on child care

The First Call Roundtable participants are clear that the Federal-Provincial ELCC Agreement dollars must be spent as intended on stabilizing and expanding access to quality regulated child care services (whether delivered in pre-school, group or family care settings) that meet the needs of working and studying parents. Meeting this urgent need will also provide developmentally appropriate settings, staffed by trained early childhood educators, in which young children can learn and develop.

We hope this open letter is helpful in sharing the experience and expectations of many people in the early childhood field and serves to help us all work more closely together to build a seamless system of child care and other ECD services that truly meet the needs of all of BC's young children and their families and caregivers.

Sincerely,

Gyda Chud

On behalf of the First Call ECD Roundtable

Organizations participating in the First Call ECD Roundtable in recent months:*

Aboriginal Mother Centre Society	Kamloops Child Development Society
BC Aboriginal Child Care Society	Kla-How-Eya Aboriginal Centre
BC Aboriginal Network on Disability Society	Langley Child Development Centre
BC Alliance Concerned with Adolescent Pregnancy and Parenthood	Make Children First (various locations)
BC Association for Child Development and Intervention	Ministry of Children and Family Development offices (various locations)
BC Government & Service Employees Union	MLA, Coquitlam-Maillardville
BC Institute Against Family Violence	Open Doors to Learning, Windows of Opportunity (Vancouver)
Boys and Girls Club Community Services, Delta/Richmond	Parent-Child Mother Goose Program
Britannia Community Services Centre	Powell River Child, Youth & Family Services
Cedar Cottage Neighborhood House	Provincial Child Care Council
Child & Youth Officer for BC	Public Health Agency of Canada
Child Care Advocacy Association of Canada	RayCam Cooperative Centre
Child Care Advocacy Forum	Sea to Sky Child and Family Services
Child Care Human Resources Sector Council	Sea to Sky Children First
Child Care Resource and Referral Centre, Vancouver Coastal Region	Service Canada
CHILD Project (UBC)	Splatsin Child Care Society
City of Vancouver	Success By 6 (various locations)
Coalition of Child Care Advocates of BC	Terrace Family Place
Community Action Program for Children, Vancouver	Tri-Cities ECD Community Development, Fraser Health Authority
Developmental Disabilities Association	Understanding the Early Years/Make Children First - Abbotsford
District of Maple Ridge	Vancouver School Board
Downtown Eastside Residents Association	Westcoast Child Care Resource Centre
Early Childhood Educators of BC	Western Canada Family Child Care Association of BC
Human Early Learning Partnership	YWCA Canada & YWCA Vancouver
Infant Development Programs of BC	

*Roundtable participation is open to all interested parties.